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NEWSPAPER ADVERTISING PRACTICE IN AN ARABIAN GULF COUNTRY

by Secil Tuncalp

Introduction

Advertising is an important marketing activity, perhaps more important in Saudi Arabia than in other international markets. According to one observer of the Saudi market, Arabs are lazy buyers (Sisley, 1980). They need to be pushed into shopping behaviour. In addition, the climatic environment prevailing in the country is not conducive to frequent shopping trips. The high humidity in the air which at times reaches 100 per cent, the frequent sand storms which sometimes last several days, and the scorching hot temperatures which can reach 140 degrees Fahrenheit or more are some of the climatic conditions which force people to abandon shopping plans in favour of staying in the air conditioned atmospheres of their homes. The reluctance on the part of the people in Saudi Arabia toward shopping can be overcome with persuasive and persistent advertising.

Newspaper advertising is the most important type of promotion outlet in Saudi Arabia (Tuncalp, 1994). Some observers estimate that 80 per cent of the advertising expenditures in Saudi Arabia are spent on newspaper advertising (Shehadi, 1984). It is also estimated that 80 per cent of the expenditures on newspaper advertising are spent on the Arabic-language newspapers and the remaining 20 per cent go to the English-language newspapers.

One explanation for the importance of newspapers as an advertising outlet in Saudi Arabia is the lack of the availability of other types of advertising media (Tuncalp, 1992). For example, radio medium is prohibited from broadcasting commercial advertising. Cinema medium is not available because traditions and social customs in Saudi Arabia are not amenable to showing of pictures in movie houses. Moreover, television advertising is available to advertisers under very controlled and limited circumstances. All of these conditions make newspaper advertising a very necessary part of marketing activities in Saudi Arabia.

It is against this brief background that the study reported in this article investigates the newspaper advertising activities in Saudi Arabia during a 30-day period. The general trends which would emerge from this study should shed some light for the planning of advertising activities by the international exporters to Saudi Arabia.

Methodology

The study was conducted in two stages. In the first stage, clipping files containing newspaper advertisements were accumulated. A Lebanese graduate student, who was bilingual in Arabic and English languages, was placed in charge of this task.

He was instructed to follow a simple procedure. Every morning, he would purchase all of the daily newspapers published in Saudi Arabia from the university's bookstore. Back in his office, he would quickly scan each newspaper to identify advertising. He would cut out each identified advertising and then place it in that day's clipping file. When back-to-back ads were spotted, where clipping of one ad would necessarily destroy the ad on the other side of a page, the student would have to make a decision as to which ad to keep. In this decision, he would be guided by three criteria for keeping ads: ads pertaining to consumer products; ads promoting imported products; and ads promoting locally manufactured goods.

This stage of the study did not present any management problems to the graduate student. He was required to monitor only fourteen daily newspapers which would contain twelve to twenty pages each. Saudi Arabia is not a newspaper rich country (Tuncalp, 1994). There are only fifteen newspapers published in the entire country. As one of them is published on a weekly schedule, this newspaper was left outside of the coverage of the study. The fourteen newspapers monitored by the graduate student included three English-language dailies: Saudi Gazette, Arab News, and Riyadh Daily. The remaining eleven were all published in the Arabic language, and these were: Asharq Al Awsat, Al Madina, Okaz, Al Bilad, Arriyadiyah, Ad Dahira, Al Nadwah, Al Jazirah, Al Riyadh, Al Massaeyah, and Al Youm. The extent of distribution for these newspapers represented a balanced mix where this mix contained newspapers which have local and national distribution and/or market coverage.

The first stage of the study was planned to last about thirty days. The scheduling of the start of the study was planned to coincide a month before the start of the summer holidays for the expatriates working in Saudi Arabia. Expatriates prefer to leave for their vocations during the hottest months which correspond to July, August, and September. During this period, there is more advertising activity in the English-language newspapers targeting expatriates. In order to accumulate data pertaining to two separate months, the study was planned to start during the middle of a month. In this manner, the study spanned over two months and contained a full second half of a month and a full first half of another month. Accordingly, the actual study started during the fifteenth day of May and ended on the fifteenth of June.

The second stage of the study involved extensive analysis of each one of the daily clipping files corresponding to the advertisements placed in fourteen newspapers published in Saudi Arabia for a period of thirty consecutive days. For this task, the researcher relied on the help voluntarily provided by two Saudi graduate students. These students were also bilingual both in the Arabic and the English languages. They frequently met with the researcher to deliberate the contents of the daily clipping files. The primary objective of these deliberations was to draw a general picture of the newspaper advertising practice in Saudi Arabia. In drawing this picture, the group especially considered the content and the context contained in these advertising practices.

Findings

Content and context analysis of ads published in local newspapers for thirty consecutive days produced several general trends. First, advertisers are opting to place their ads in only one or two newspapers for any one specific time period, usually one Arabic language daily and/or one English language daily. In other words, advertisers are not placing their ads in several of the local newspapers to reach as many readers as possible.

Considering the fact that there are only fourteen dailies, saturating all of these newspapers with the same ads would be a better advertising strategy. Many of these newspapers have a local character with limited distribution (Tuncalp, 1994). For example, there are only three newspapers that can muster circulations above 100 thousand. More than half of the newspapers report official circulation figures which are less than fifty thousand. Obviously, placing ads in one or two newspapers would give advertisers a very narrow market reach and exposure. Perhaps, the high costs involved with the advertising space sold in newspapers (Tuncalp, 1994) is the reason why advertisers are limiting their market exposures by placing their ads in only one or two newspapers at a time.

Second, many of the ads placed by the same advertisers which appeared in the English language and the Arabic language newspapers were translated copies of each other. In these ads, the advertisers would use the same layouts and illustrations as the visual appeals, and would also use simple idiomatic translations of the verbal appeals. Instead of preparing separate ads for the English and the Arabic dailies, the current practice of using simply translated ads in both types of media is an indication of the lack of marketing sophistication for the advertisers and their advertising agencies.

Considering the fact that the English language and the Arabic language newspapers are targeting separate and different readership segments, the use of translations of standard looking and reading ads in both types of media is difficult to understand. The English language newspapers are targeting the millions of guest workers in the country (Tuncalp, 1988). These guest workers come from many different countries located in Europe, North Africa, Far East, Asia, and North America. Their common communication medium is the English language. This market segment exhibits an entirely different set of characteristics than the readers of the Arabic language newspapers who are the Saudis and the citizens of other Arabic countries (Yavas and Tuncalp, 1983a; Yavas *et al.*, 1988; Yavas and Tuncalp, 1989; Tuncalp and Yavas, 1990; Tuncalp, 1993). Therefore, advertising targeted to these two separate market segments should at least use different visual appeals, and perhaps use different verbal appeals as well.

Third, advertisers are opting to place ads in the local newspapers on a very discontinuous basis. That is to say, there were very few advertisers who placed ads in the newspapers on more than one occasion during the study period. Those few advertisers who either repeated the placement of the same ad or placed different ads on several occasions were all large international companies doing business in Saudi Arabia.

The "one-shot" approach used by most advertisers in Saudi Arabia is difficult to explain. Perhaps, one explanation lies with their attitudes toward advertising (Tuncalp, 1990) and with their lack of understanding of the role played by advertising in the buyer purchase decision process (Luck *et.al.*, 1989). The perception on the part of the advertisers that an infrequently placed ad in one newspaper would persuade their customers to come running to buy their products should reflect negatively on their sophistication as marketers. Another explanation of this practice may lie with the way advertisers plan and implement advertising programmes in Saudi Arabia. Infrequent and spotty placement of ads in newspapers may be an indication that these advertisers do not have formally prepared advertising plans covering certain periods of time such as a year. During the study period, their ads appeared in the local newspapers as part of arbitrary decisions made by the company officials.

Fourth, the study of ads which appeared in the local newspapers for thirty consecutive days was able to identify very few full-scale advertising campaigns. These campaigns would typically involve blanketing a market with a series of related advertisements that would focus on a common theme, slogan, and a set of advertising appeals (Lamb *et.al.*, 1992). When these campaigns are completed, the series of visual and verbal appeals used in them would fit together into "master appeals", which would be instrumental in persuading customers to purchase the goods and services of these advertisers.

Advertising campaigns are the building blocks of comprehensive advertising objectives and strategies needed for achieving marketing objectives. The absence of these building blocks would imply the absence of advertising strategies, and perhaps the absence of marketing strategies. As the findings of this study show, the lack of full fledged advertising campaigns in Saudi Arabia could be an indication of the haphazard approach used by advertisers to promote their goods and services; and perhaps, to market their products and services as well (Kassem, 1989).

Fifth, a general trend was observed in the format of the ads published during the thirty days allocated to the study. Advertisers are preferring to place their ads in the newspapers using as large size formats as possible. Despite their prohibitive costs, full-page and half-a-page ads can be frequently spotted in the newspapers. However, the most common ad size preferred by the advertisers is the quarter-of-a-page format. One reason for this preference could be the belief on the part of the advertisers that large size ads will more easily grab the attention of their targeted audiences.

Finally, several trends were observed among the advertisers that placed ads in the local papers during the study period. Other than a local air conditioner manufacturer, there were no other local manufacturers that placed ads in the newspapers. All of the other active advertisers during the study period were the large international companies that did business in Saudi Arabia and/or the Saudi representatives of these international companies that participated in co-operative advertising with their mother companies. Among the active advertisers, the international Japanese manufacturers appeared to be the most frequent advertisers in the newspapers followed

by the international companies from the USA (Tuncalp and Yavas, 1986; Tuncalp, 1987).

The aggressive advertising practices of the Japanese and the American manufacturers in Saudi Arabia have been paying dividends for them. For the last twenty years or more, these two countries have been battling out for the market leadership position (Tuncalp, Yavas and Cavusgil, 1987). Some years its the American manufacturers who are the top exporters to Saudi Arabia; some other years it is the Japanese producers. Each one of these two countries has been accounting for anywhere from 16-21 per cent of the total annual Saudi imports. The rest of the market traditionally goes to exporters from such other countries as England, West Germany, Italy, France, South Korea, Taiwan, Switzerland, Netherlands, Belgium, and China.

Another trend related to the product categories that were frequently advertised during the study period. Advertising of audio/video equipment made by the Japanese manufacturers was the most commonly appearing ads in the newspapers. These equipments included televisions, video recorders/players, and video cameras. Advertising of Japanese made kitchen appliances also appeared quite frequently in the newspapers. Japanese and US manufactured automobiles and air conditioners were other product categories which could be observed being frequently advertised. Because Japanese manufacturers have been dominating the advertising scene in Saudi Arabia, their products enjoy strong positive images among the buyers in the Saudi market (Yavas and Tuncalp, 1983b; Yavas, Cavusgil and Tuncalp, 1987). The last two product categories which received intensive advertising activities were perfumes and watches. However, advertisers of these product categories would opt to keep their ads in small sizes, much smaller than a quarter-of-a-page in area.

Summary and Conclusions

The results of the study show that advertisers in Saudi Arabia are opting to schedule their ads in only one or two newspapers, namely one English-language and one Arabic-language dailies. These ads tend to be translated copies of each other. Advertisers do not follow a continuous pattern in scheduling their ads. There are also very few advertising campaigns containing a series of ads built around a common visual and/or verbal appeal. Advertisers are preferring to keep the format of their ads as large as possible equalling or exceeding a quarter of a page in size. Finally, advertisers consist primarily of large international Japanese companies who market such products as audio/video equipment, kitchen appliances, automobiles, and air conditioners.

It is now possible to conjure up several recommendations to international marketers advertising their goods and services in Saudi Arabia using newspapers. The Saudi market is not a homogeneous market: it exhibits a very fractionalised character (Tuncalp, 1988). The several millions of guest workers residing in the country consist of many different nationality groups. There is still a large Yemeni community. Even the Saudi portion of the market contain several segments such as Beduins, urban/rural Saudis, regional tribes, religious sects, etc. All of these fractions in the market differ from each other in terms of needs, wants, values,

beliefs, attitudes, experiences, language, and many other aspects of their culture. Therefore, before planning their advertising objectives and strategies, the advertisers must carefully decide upon their target market or markets, and how best to reach and communicate with them.

There is not a single newspaper which can provide advertisers with an intensive market coverage and give them an ability to reach most of the members of their target markets with their advertising appeals. All of the fourteen dailies published in Saudi Arabia have limited circulations and regional distribution qualities. This condition requires advertisers to scramble the newspapers they use with their advertising activities in order to maximise the reach of their ads. For example, if advertisers are targeting the English-language speaking segment of the Kingdom-wide market, then they should place their ads in all of the three English-language dailies in order to get as much market reach as possible.

In this case, advertisers should place ads in the Riyadh Daily which is published in Riyadh and would give advertisers extensive coverage of the Central Province; in the Arab News which is published in Jeddah and would give them market reach in the Western and Eastern Provinces; and in the Saudi Gazette which is published also in Jeddah and would give them market exposure mostly in the Western Province. Similar types of arguments can also be made for the Arabic-language dailies.

The international advertisers cannot get away anymore by using home-country ads in Saudi Arabia which are translated into the Arabic language. The Saudi market now is important enough to warrant its own advertisements prepared to effectively communicate companys' messages to their target markets within the special cultural environment of Saudi Arabia. In other words, advertisers must view Saudi Arabia as a long-term marketing opportunity and their advertising activities must reflect their long-term commitments to this lucrative market.

Finally, advertisers need to arrange the scheduling of their newspaper advertising activities with meticulous care. For example, advertising activities targeting guest workers need to be scheduled frequently and on a more continuous basis. The need to advertise more continuously stems from the fact that there is a fast turnover among the guest workers. Every year, millions of non-skilled guest workers enter the country and similar amounts depart the Kingdom when their short-term work contracts come to an end. Newcomers have to be reached with informative and persuasive types of newspaper advertising. Departing guest workers have to be reminded with newspaper advertising the kinds of goods they should purchase in Saudi Arabia for taking back home.

In addition, the advertising activities targeting this market segment need to peak just before the vocation period for most of the professional guest workers. These types of guest workers including teachers and university professors, dentists and

doctors, nurses, engineers, and business managers prefer to leave Saudi Arabia for their annual vacations during the hottest months corresponding to July, August, and September. These affluent travellers also take back with themselves all sorts of household goods which are not available or which are more expensive back in their home countries.

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